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## **Article Celibacy : New Testament**

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## Art. Celibacy. NT, EBR 4 (2012) 1086–1089

### II. New Testament

[1086] In the following, celibacy refers to a permanent renunciation of sexual activity, self-imposed by certain social groups and individuals with regard to [1087] their religious beliefs. Celibacy is not encountered in any early Christian currents. Yet, it characterizes persons and texts of preeminent importance for the historical and theological development of the early church. It is impossible to distinguish precisely between celibacy and asceticism, the latter of which comprises further restrictions on corporeality and might be considered more programmatic.

#### 1. The Jesus Tradition

Generally speaking, the vagrant Jesus movement distinguishes itself through its rejection of permanent residency, family, and possessions. In this regard, Luke explicitly mentions the abandoning of a spouse (Luke 18 : 29; 14 : 26; cf. 14 : 20; for 20 : 35 cf. below). Yet, even married couples were counted among apostolic wanderers (1 Cor 9 : 5). Especially succinct seems the word on eunuchs in Matt 19 : 12, which might even go back to the historical Jesus. While not being considered mandatory, permanent celibacy for the sake of the kingdom of God is portrayed in this text as a special, extraordinary way of following Jesus (cf. Matt 19 : 5 and 19 : 10). The same applies to Jesus himself: he was, just as his preceptor, John the Baptist, and the hermit Bannus (Josephus, *Vita* 11) unmarried. However, the reasons for this unusual way of life are unknown to us. Contemporary Judaism held both marriage and procreation in high esteem (Gen 1 : 28), albeit attesting to certain (marginal) tendencies towards sexual asceticism (van der Horst). The anticipation of an eschatological angelical existence, which transcends any sexual relation, might be rather more central than the concepts of priestly purity, holy war and Nazarite vow respectively (Mark 12 : 25 par. [“no sex in heaven”]; which in Luke 20 : 35 is already considered contemporary). In general, it might be discerned that Jesus as well as his followers radically dissociate themselves from their familial relations (Luke 9 : 57–62; Mark 3 : 21 and 3 : 31–35). Within the context of Matthew’s “Teaching about Divorce” (Matt 19 : 1–12), the discourse on

eunuchs either serves to interlink the refusal to permit divorced men to remarry with an attractive alternative, or, more likely – and true for Jesus – to emphasize the charismatic distinctiveness of celibacy as a way of life; perhaps in contradistinction to an increasing fascination with Encratitic movements. (cf. v. 10).

## 2. Paul (1 Cor 7)

The inquiry of the Corinthians regarding the status of marital life, which apparently included an eminently critical discourse on sexuality (1 Cor 7 : 1), is answered by Paul in a differentiating way (1 Cor 7 : 1–7). On the one hand, he does not generally reject marriage or sexuality; he does, however, advise against divorces (preferred by the Corinthians for ascetic reasons?); the equality regarding physical attention is remarkable (vv. 2–4). On the other hand, Paul considerably favors celibacy over marriage (vv. 7–8); he wishes that all Christians would chose the better alternative and [1088] live in celibacy, which he considers – unlike marriage – a “gift of grace [χάρισμα].” Paul primarily perceives marriage as a *remedium concupiscentiae*, meant to prevent fornication. In vv. 25–35, general remarks are accompanied by concrete advice (vv. 25– 28 and 36–40). The status of virgins (young girls of nubile age or *virgines subintroductae*, that is virgins who lived in celibate relationships with older, male ascetics?), for which the Corinthians demanded clarification, remains obscure. Regarding ethical instructions, Paul offers two different justifications also encountered in contemporary Greek-speaking Judaism, which go back to apocalyptic and Stoic- Cynic movements, respectively (Deming), and recommend celibacy as the preferred alternative. Both justifications, of course, presuppose the maintenance of one’s social status: vv. 29–31 suggest that one is directed towards the heathen world “as if not,” vv. 32–35 judge any behavior in accordance with one’s individual relation toward Jesus, the Kyrios, which qualifies any human relationship (cf. 1 Cor 6 : 12–20). The background for the differentiating criterion in Gal 3 : 28, which might have been formative for the understanding of asceticism in Corinth (cf. 1 Cor 7 : 19; 12 : 13), cannot be determined precisely. The formulaic aphorism contrasts the new personhood in Christ with the polar creation of humankind in Gen 1 : 26 (cf. *Gos. Thom.* 11 : 4, 22, 37; *Gos. Eg.* frg. 1–3; *2 Clem.* 12 : 2). Just as in the Jesus

tradition (cf. Luke 20 : 35), this might allude to a trans-sexual angelic existence, which the faithful have already begun to realize, right here and right now.

### 3. Debates about Celibacy in the Pauline Tradition

The Pastoral Epistles testify to a conflict concerning the status of sexual abstinence which seems to have been attractive esp. among “widows” (1 Tim 5 : 3–16). The author of 1 Timothy, selectively echoing Paul’s instructions about marriage, tries to reform the order of widows defining “widow” very narrowly and excluding younger women who choose to live in sexual abstinence rather than marrying at all. This restriction goes together with an emphatic rhetoric of conservative values as rules for dress, adornment, silence, and subordination. It seems that the Pastoral Epistles react to a kind of ascetic proto-gnostic movement (rather more than directly to the Marcionite movement).

### 4. Celibacy beyond the Jesus Tradition and Paul’s Epistles.

Beyond the Jesus tradition and Paul’s Epistles, the reference to the 144,000 (cf. Rev 7 : 4–8) as “the ones who have not been defiled with women” (Rev 14 : 4) and those who “sung a new song” (cf. Rev 5 : 9–10) might point to the ascetic self-conception of Syrio-Palestinian charismatic wanderers. However, such sexual terminology might also just describe religious behavior metaphorically (cf. Rev 3 : 4; 18 : 3), thus paving the way for the image of the “marriage of the Lamb” (Rev 19 : 7; 21 : 2).

[1089] 5. Conclusion and Ramifications. Impulses favoring a strictly celibate ideal evolved among early Christian wanderers. This ideal derives its origins from Jesus (and John the Baptist) and was mixed with eschatological imagery (a new creation in form of an angelic existence). For a while, this concept coexisted peacefully with the traditional Jewish ideal of marriage, over which it had, of course, been given precedence. In the 2nd and 3rd century CE, the concept nurtured the emergence of ascetic movements, in early monasticism it transformed into an ideal of “angelic life.”

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